

Evidence-Based Dropout Prevention

The National High School Center identifies effective, research-based steps schools can take to prevent students from dropping out of school in its publication Approaches to Dropout Prevention: Heeding Early Warning Signs with Appropriate Interventions. Readers can learn more by obtaining this publication electronically at http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_ApproachesToDropoutPrevention.pdf.

For more information from the School
Social Work Practice Guide visit:
http://sspw.dpi.wi.gov/sspw_sswguide

The key indicators that predict students who are more likely to drop out of school are:

- poor grades in core subjects,
- low attendance,
- failure to be promoted to the next grade, and
- disengagement in the classroom, including behavioral problems.

The most effective dropout prevention is focused early in middle school. Key studies have found:

- More than half of sixth graders who attended school less than half the time, received a low final behavior grade, and failed either math or English, eventually dropped out of school (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005).
- Three out of four eighth graders who miss five (or more) weeks of school or fail math or English left school without graduating (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).
- Almost two-thirds of students who repeated a grade in elementary or middle school left school without a diploma (Alexander et. al., 1997).

This publication lists recommendations to help school-communities effectively identify potential school dropouts. In general, grades are a better predictor of dropping out of school than test scores.

1. Establish a data system that tracks individual student attendance, grades, promotion status, and engagement indicators, such as behavioral marks, as early as fourth grade.
2. Determine criteria for who is considered “off-track” for graduation and establish a continuum of appropriate interventions.
3. Track ninth grade students who miss 10 or more days of school in the first 30 days.
4. Monitor first quarter, first semester, and second semester freshmen grades, with particular attention to core academic subjects.
5. Track students who failed too many core subjects to be promoted to tenth grade.

Below is a list of proven dropout prevention strategies, which should be applied consistently with the risk factors demonstrated by students.

- Attendance and behavior monitors
- Tutoring and counseling
- Establishment of small learning communities for greater personalization
- Engaging catch-up courses
- Ninth Grade Academies
- Homerooms
- Benchmarking
- Tiered interventions
- A focus on equal access to rigorous coursework and high expectations
- Career/college awareness
- Community engagement
- Eighth to ninth grade transition programs

A positive and inviting school climate can help to facilitate many of these strategies.

A national fact sheet on high school dropouts can be found at
http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_DropoutFactSheet.pdf.